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War Food Administration
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Case History
of a
Nutrition Committee Activity

HOW A COUNTY ORGANIZED TO IMPROVE FAMILY LIVING 1/THE COMMUNITY

"Ascension Parish is a typical Louisiana rural parish, in wealth and standards of living neither far above nor far below the average in the state. But, as is the case with many other rural counties in the South, the conditions of life are not satisfactory. The farm people are without many of the conveniences and essentials necessary to the maintenance of a high level of living. Many people still have to live in sub-standard homes. Health and recreational facilities are below minimum standards. The per capita income does not permit the people to live in accordance with standards commensurate with the natural resources. Their diet is not of the best. They are not receiving the full benefits of the resources which are available to them....." 2/

The population of Ascension Parish is 21,215, of which 37 per cent are Negroes. Donaldsonville, the largest town, has a population of 3,800. The chief occupation is agriculture. Sugar cane and rice are the most important crops. Strawberries, corn, and Irish and sweet potatoes are also grown.

"Family life in Ascension Parish is unusually stable, with the divorce rate much lower than the national or state average. Families are fairly large, permanence of residence being an outstanding characteristic of the inhabitants. The people are proud of and actively interested in the welfare of their families, homes, churches and schools. There are the usual parish public-service agents, and a public welfare organization." 2/

"English is the universal language of the parish, and in many instances is characterized by a French, Spanish or Italian accent." 2/ The home demonstration agent reports that there are some farm women who do not speak English but a good many who understand French better. She finds it a great convenience to have a French speaking assistant.

"The public-school system of the parish is under the jurisdiction of the Ascension Parish School Board and is administered by a parish superintendent appointed by that Board for periods of four years. The present superintendent has held office since 1925. The board....has improved the finances, raised the standards of the teaching corps, both white and colored, and consolidated 20 white schools into four combination elementary-high schools and one elementary school. The high schools are so located that every white child lives within ten miles of a high school." 2/

1/ Based on State Department of Education of Louisiana Bulletin No. 517 - "Report of the School Work Conference of Ascension Parish, Louisiana", and on a report by Mr. L. J. Babin, Superintendent of the Ascension Parish Schools, who is also Chairman of the Parish Nutrition Committee.

2/ Quotations from Bulletin No. 517 (see Footnote 1)

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"There are 12 Negro schools in the parish, one being a high school with 11 teachers and 350 pupils. . . The parish is also served by two white parochial schools at Donaldsonville. . . A Catholic Negro school at Donaldsonville has approximately 300 pupils." 2/

THE NUTRITION COMMITTEE

The Nutrition Committee in Ascension Parish, Louisiana, was started as a wartime food measure. The committee was organized in Donaldsonville at the Court House on October 22, 1941, with 33 in attendance. The Consultant on Nutrition of the State Board of Health, acting as a representative of the State Nutrition Committee, helped with the organization, explaining the need for and work of a parish nutrition committee. The Superintendent of Schools was elected chairman of the committee, and the Extension Service Home Demonstration Agent was elected co-chairman. The organizations represented at the meeting were: Agricultural Extension Service, Parish Health Unit, Parish Welfare, Schools, Medical Associations, American Red Cross, Police Jury, W. P. A., Office of Civilian Defense, Farm Security Administration, A. A. A., Production Credit Organization, Federal Land Bank, Mother's Clubs, and local officials.

Later the heads of agencies, organizations, and groups were called together by the chairman to plan a program. They were tired of saying, "eat 5 eggs a week" and "drink milk" when neither eggs, milk, nor some of the other protective foods were available in all the homes. Moreover, many of the families did not fully appreciate the need for these foods. The 1940 census for Louisiana showed that one out of every six farm homes had no milch cow. One home out of every four had no hogs for a family meat supply, and one home out of every five had no chickens.

To secure results, the nutrition committee wisely decided that a nutrition program for Ascension Parish needed to be a combined production and education program. The goals, resources, and activities of every agency and group needed to be integrated into a unified program to build better living conditions for the people. The nutrition committee did not want to start a new program, but rather to use the interest that could be aroused to improve not only nutrition but living conditions as a whole in Ascension Parish. All agencies--educational, welfare, health and civic--intensified and coordinated their efforts.

GOALS ESTABLISHED

A school-community agricultural survey was made by the teachers and pupils with the assistance and guidance of the Parish Extension agents, and with the cooperation of the parents and the heads of various agencies. This survey enabled the committee to set up a specific list of objectives, which, if put into practice would greatly better the living conditions of the people of Ascension Parish.

"The specific objectives of the 1941-42 program were set up as follows:

1. To reveal living conditions through a socio-economic survey of school communities.

2/ Quotation from Bulletin No. 517 (see Footnote 1)

2. To improve health and nutrition
 - (a) half-pint of milk for every school child
 - (b) Expansion of school-community lunch program
 - (c) Physical examination of every school child, with follow-up corrective measures where needed.
 - (d) Drainage and housing as post-war projects
 - (e) Screened homes
 - (f) Running water
 - (g) Sewage disposal
 - (h) Bath facilities
 - (i) Homestead beautification
3. To promote a live-at-home program
 - (a) A milch cow on every farm
 - (b) A brood sow on every farm
 - (c) A poultry flock in every yard
 - (d) Home-grown feed
 - (e) Canning of surplus foods
 - (f) Budgeting the farm income
 - (g) A vegetable garden
 - (h) Increasing farm income
4. To place school programs on a wartime basis
(in 1942-43 Victory Corps were organized)
5. To establish closer relationships between home and school
 - (a) Visitations and community gatherings
 - (b) School-community recreation programs
6. To develop marketing facilities
Grading, classifying, and standardizing farm products
7. To develop small dairies
Assistance of local bank
8. To develop library facilities for rural families." 3/

COORDINATED WORK BEGINS

As in many other communities, not all of the people of the parish were receptive to new ideas. Public opinion would have to be crystalized. The committee felt that time would be saved and mass interest aroused if they presented the idea to a large number of people at the same time. They conceived the idea of holding parishwide meetings with prominent leaders of the state as speakers.

3/ See footnote 1, page 1

The Governor of the State and two Congressmen came to one meeting, not to talk politics, but to talk food and the value of this coordinated parish program. The high-school band played. There was group singing and songs by the high-school chorus. Mimeographed copies of the survey findings were distributed and an analysis of the survey presented by a high school student. To focus further attention upon the local application of better living through good nutrition a milch cow, ten purebred pigs, twelve dozen baby chicks, and feed were given as attendance prizes at this meeting. The "big meeting" plan repeated over the parish in all high school communities popularized good nutrition and did away with opposition to changes.

Since the representatives of all agencies helped to set the goals for Ascension Parish all agencies had the same goal, namely, to help Ascension Parish organize to improve family living--with emphasis on nutrition. Every family was urged to produce more food and feed. The Home Demonstration Agent taught a 20-hour Red Cross Nutrition Course. The meaning of enriched white flour and bread was explained. The Parish group assisted the State Committee in securing legislation on enriched white flour, bread and fortified margarine. Posters on "Eat the Right Food" and the Basic 7 Food Groups were displayed in many public places. Many more meetings were held. A campaign against "Food Wastes in the Home" was carried on, and consumers signed pledges against food waste. The nutrition committee cooperated with O.P.A. to acquaint the people with point rationing. Radio talks were made. Bulletins were distributed and news articles written.

SCHOOL LUNCHESES FOR GOOD NUTRITION

The Superintendent of Schools felt that mothers had a definite responsibility in any school lunch program. The nutrition committee thought that school lunches would improve the health and learning ability of the school children and decided to sponsor school lunches. To bring the schools and the homes closer together, meetings were called to discuss mutual cooperation. Attendance prizes in the form of canning equipment, garden seeds, and cabbage plants were offered. The response was splendid. The mothers came and were entertained by the school band and choral group. The school children were allowed to attend a part of each meeting so that they would be receptive to the idea of a change in their food routine. The value of a hot noon-time meal was discussed and recommendations made for setting up hot lunches in the parish schools. Various committees were formed to promote the school lunch program.

THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATES

A Negro Civilian Defense Nutrition Meeting was held in Donaldsonville attended by four hundred persons. The need for more and better gardens was emphasized. Pigs, chickens, and a collection of garden seeds were given as attendance prizes.

The nutrition committee explained the "Share-the-Meat-Campaign" to the people; food demonstrations were given and good food practices encouraged. The slogan "A Milch Cow for Every Back Yard", was popularized. Parishwide poultry meetings were held to stimulate interest in a good home poultry flock.

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The close relation of the Nutrition Committee Chairman to the schools and his long experience in the parish stimulated two summer work conferences which further integrated the work of all the agencies in developing a unified program for better family living. The school Superintendent felt that there was need for in-service training for teachers in order that school and family life be more closely integrated as a part of the community whole. The ultimate aim of the workshop was to help solve the social and economic problems of the community. The workshops held during the summers of 1943 and 1944, through the cooperation of the General Education Board, proved very helpful in promoting nutrition work. The elementary teachers reported that they now felt that they had a very definite responsibility in teaching nutrition. They felt that even children in the primary grades could learn a great deal about nutrition if their classroom studies emphasized its importance. Supplementary readers were developed for each grade based upon local resources, both human and natural.

RESULTS OF THIS COORDINATED PROGRAM AND PLANS FOR THE NEXT YEAR

On October 10, 1944, almost a hundred and fifty community leaders in Ascension Parish had a supper meeting at one of the schools to discuss the results of the nutrition program and to make future plans. They found the results most heartening. Very gratifying was the parishwide community-school relationship which was evidenced at this particular school by the provision of a feed mill, a canning center, and other facilities for community use.

Through community participation hot lunch facilities had been improved in all schools, both white and Negro. A parishwide milk program had been inaugurated in the white schools. An example of excellent cooperation between mothers and teachers for the benefit of the children is illustrated by the case history of one school in the parish. At the beginning of the fall session the principal asked all mothers to meet with him to discuss ways and means of administering the school lunch program. At this meeting the mothers decided to take turns in cooperating with the Home Economics teacher and the lunch room workers. The group worked out a definite schedule so that on each school day two or three of the mothers would come with the children on the school bus to spend the day working in the lunch room. This cooperative plan proved doubly helpful in that it aided with the actual work of preparing, supervising, and serving lunch to the children and at the same time provided means of carrying nutrition information back into the homes. Furthermore, the school lunch did not become a burden on just a few willing teachers and mothers. The mothers felt that they were an integral part of the school lunch program. They became happily acquainted with the purposes and values of the program and with their neighbors.

But accomplishments did not end with the school lunch program. Vegetable gardening had increased by fifty percent. Many of the farmers, assisted by the Extension Agents had bought plants and seeds on a cooperative basis. This increase in gardens meant that families were laying the foundation for a live-at-home program which would improve the economic status of the family as well as their standard of living. The bank made individual loans for cows and calves to the amount of ten thousand dollars. Five years' time was allowed for repayment of a loan when a bull calf to improve the herd was purchased.

Three small dairies with pasteurizing plants had been established. Other reports were equally gratifying.

GOALS FOR 1945

The purpose of the October supper meeting, arranged by the Nutrition Committee, was to give the people in the community an opportunity to become more familiar with the objectives and workings of the program. The food for the supper was produced and canned in the community. The Nutrition Committee invited representatives from all fraternal, religious, and civic organizations to this meeting which was held at one of the rural high schools. The mimeographed program listed pertinent questions bringing out phases and goals of the parish program. When the meeting opened the Chairman of the Nutrition Committee, who is also superintendent of schools, described briefly the scope and functions of the Parish program and asked the representatives to explain the objectives to their respective organizations. Staff members of the cooperating agencies (local, State, Federal) then described the contributions of their agencies. Because of the nature of the meeting their comments were keyed to the implication of nutrition in community betterment.

Following the consideration of attainments in 1944, the discussion centered around the 11 objectives for 1945:

OBJECTIVES FOR 1944-45

1. To coordinate the nutrition work of the various agencies for efficiency in service to the public.
2. To create a desire for better health
3. To maintain and to improve school lunchroom facilities.
4. To encourage an adequate and safe water supply.
5. To produce, to conserve, and to utilize food.
6. To have an adequate milk supply.
7. To promote small dairy units.
8. To encourage feed production.
9. To stress the need of starting the day off with a good breakfast.
10. To have adequate food, clothing and shelter
11. To improve home life in all of its phases.

These objectives were considered in terms of ways and means of accomplishing them, which provided food for thought and for action on the part of all present.